

Third Sunday of Easter
April 15, 2018

Luke 24:13-27
Luke 24:28-34

Unwrapped Presence

He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

A Wrinkle in Time was one of my favorite books as a child. I haven't seen the movie, but I know that Madeline L'Engle was a stunningly gifted story teller. Maybe you know that she was also a devoted Christian. She once told the story of something that happens when her daughter was very small. The little girl was afraid to sleep in her own room and would often cry out in the night.

L'Engle, an accomplished theologian, at first tried to comfort her daughter with incarnational theology. She'd say,

“Don't be afraid, Honey. God will be with you.”
Her daughter was not impressed.
“I know Mommy,” she would say, “But I want **somebody with skin on.**”ⁱ

I think Madeline L'Engle's daughter speaks for all of us. The idea of God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, is a wonderful thing, and we worship him, but in a crisis we want someone with skin on. **We need a flesh-and-blood Messiah – someone present, accessible and real.**

The **Jesus** two disciples encountered on the road to Emmaus **was flesh and blood real, not a ghost, as some suspected.** His body is different, transformed in some way, so that that Cleopas and his companion, very likely his wife, didn't immediately recognize him. That happens a lot, you know. Jesus comes to us, as Mother Teresa often said, “in many distressing disguises.”

While they were skeptical, and “slow of heart to believe” they are **also curious** regarding this stranger who “interprets all the scriptures.” So they invite him to come and stay with them. Here's the rest of the story from Luke, chapter 24:

As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”

So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray:

Now that Christ is risen everything is fresh and new. Because he lives our lives are full of possibility and potential. Sometimes we forget about that. Sometimes we live as though nothing is possible, as though our fate is to live day after day in the same dreary routine. Today as we consider the good news that is your gospel, startle us you're your unwrapped presence in our lives and in our world, and open us again to the astounding news, that Christ is no longer in the tomb, that he has risen indeed! We pray this in his name and to his glory. Amen.

There was a young couple **looking for a place to get married**. They looked at more than a dozen venues: stunning outdoor vista, historic homes, rustic barns and lots of churches. They visited country chapels and spectacular cathedrals, one, in particular that had huge flying buttresses and the most beautiful stained glass windows that either of them had ever seen.

In the end they chose to have their wedding in an old, cinder block, rectangular building with florescent lights and an electric organ. A few homemade felt banners from the 1970's hung on the walls. Why there when they could have chosen to be married anywhere? It was a simple decision, the bride said. **That church is where she was baptized**, where she had gone through **confirmation**, where her **grandparents memorial services** had been held. It was the place where she had come to know something of the love and grace of God. ⁱⁱ They finally realized that while the building was important, what was far more important was the fact this was where her church met – the people who, **through many years had been God with skin on – for her**. The people of that little cinder block church unwrapped the presence of Christ in her life.

We sometimes call this the body of Christ. And we mean it literally. St. Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun who lived in Spain in the 16th century, famously put the idea this way:

*Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours,
no feet but ours,
Ours are the eyes through which to look out
Christ's compassion to the world
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Ours are the hands with which he is to bless the world now.*

Back in the 18th chapter of Matthew Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.” ⁱⁱⁱ He wasn't speaking metaphorically. Jesus Christ is actually present with us now. During the Reformation John Calvin and the others reformers **rejected the Catholic notion of transubstantiation**, that is, the idea that upon consecration the bread and wine of Communion physically change into the body and blood of Christ. Calvin kept idea of **Real Presence**, sometimes called Spiritual Presence. He taught that when **we receive the bread and the cup in faith, we receive the actual body and blood of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit** – although this happens in the spirit. There is no change in the substance.

For Luke's first readers the unwrapped presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper –as in all our worship -- was supremely important because Luke's congregation had lost their worship center. Between the years of 66-70 AD the great Temple in Jerusalem, Herod's Temple, the Temple where Jesus taught, was completely destroyed, razed to the ground by the Roman army. You can imagine their agony. The idea that Jesus Christ was and is present anywhere two or more are gathered in his name, that we can recognize him in the breaking of the bread, that changed everything. Where is the sacred center? It is wherever God's people are.

A few years ago, during the wildfires in southern California, the Malibu Presbyterian Church burned to the ground. Shortly after that I saw an interview with one of the elders of that church on CNN. The reporter expressed his sympathy, “I am so sorry you lost your church,” the reporter said. The elder looked confused. “What do you mean we ‘lost our church’?” He asked the reporter. “We lost our building. Our church is just fine.”

This emphasis on the spiritual presence of Christ does not mean that God is uninterested in the physical. If anything it means just the opposite. By reminding his readers that the risen Christ walked among his disciples, that he ate and drank with them Luke is reminding us again that God has entered into our humanity, hallowing the physical. The Greeks taught that this physical realm was evil and that the purpose of religion was to provide an escape from it. The Christian gospels say, "No!" Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and even raised the dead. His prophets demanded that we do justice, love kindness and walk in humility beside the poor and all those in need.

So when you hear people declare that the church ought to stay out of political matters such as healthcare, gun safety, issues of war and peace and immigration -- remember, that this is exactly the argument of slave owners used in 1800's to silence the abolitionists. In fact, in the old Southern Presbyterian Church actually had a document called "The Spirituality of the Church" that said that churches should stick to "saving souls" and stay out of economics. By that I think they meant slavery.

Read on down to the end of Luke 24 when you get home today. You'll see that the risen Jesus goes on to encounter more of his disciples. He asks them to touch him. He eats with them. Slowly he unwraps the reality of his presence with them. In verse 39 he invited them to "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."

His church, his body on the earth, still has flesh and bones. When we are on our game, we are God-with-skin-on -- for orphans in Malawai, homeless neighbors at Winter Relief and these precious children in Sunday school. The sacred is not beyond the earth. It's right here, among us "where two or three are gathered" in his name.

My friends Kim and Tom moved to Atlanta a few years ago, and as they are Christians, they went looking for a church. They decided to join Central Presbyterian, a downtown congregation across from the capital. They chose it because Central is a mission-oriented congregation. Prior to their meeting with the Session there was, as you might expect, a Wednesday night dinner with the pastors and the elders. Tom and Kim were invited, so they went.

Everyone was in the Fellowship Hall and after the dinner the pastor asked if they could go around the room and each person say a bit about why they were joining. One person said, "I'm a musician, and this church has a fine music program." Another couple said, "We have two teenage children and the ministry with youth and families here is fantastic." Another person said, "I don't like the new preacher at my church so I started coming here. I like your preacher here fine." Honest answers.

Finally they got to Marshall. He explained that he'd been addicted to crack cocaine and on the streets. He stumbled into the church's Outreach Center one day begging for help. The director said, "I can't get you into a treatment program for another month, but you can stay with us; we will stay with you." She took Marshall's hand and they knelt on the carpet and prayed, and he stayed. Marshall said, "I've been sober for three years now, **and the reason I'm joining this church is that God saved me in this church.**"

Kim and Tom and everyone else around the table looked at each other sheepishly. They were there for the music and the parking. **He was there for salvation.**

A few weeks later there was a **line in the church newsletter** that said that **Marshall was now an inmate in the DeKalb County jail**. Tom was startled. They had joined the church together; they were brothers in Christ, so he decided to go to the jail and visit Marshall. After three metal detectors, he found himself

sitting on the opposite side of a thick plate-glass window holding a telephone, looking at Marshall in the orange jumpsuit of a DeKalb County prisoner holding the phone.

“How are you, Marshall?”

“By the grace of God, I’m doing all right.” He said.

“What happened?”

Marshall explained that he was at the Outreach Center, counseling people like himself off the street, trying to be Christ to them, but he realized he hadn’t been Christ to himself. There was a warrant for his arrest in DeKalb County. It was an old warrant, probably never would have caught up with him – but he knew about it. So, on Christmas Eve, he turned himself in.

“I’ll be out by Easter.” He told Tom. “I **cannot wait to worship on Easter**. But in the meantime, I’ve got an outreach center going here in the jail. A lot of people here can’t read or write – so I write letters to their families telling them they miss them and love them. Every night we have a prayer meeting in my cell, not many men come, but we pray for the other prisoners and the guards.”

Tom said, “I looked through the plate-glass at my brother in Christ, Marshall, in the jumpsuit of a DeKalb County prisoner and I saw one of the freest human beings in the world.”^{iv}

Sometimes, not often enough, the followers of Jesus Christ become the unwrapped presence of God to the world, “God with skin on” as Madeline L’Engle would say. As we come to the table of our Lord today, I pray that God will open our eyes to recognize them.

ⁱⁱ Madeline L’Engle by William Willimon, “The Resurrection of the Body” Pulpit Resource, Spring 2000, 29

ⁱⁱ Steven Montgomery, “It’s Touching Time” *Day1* radio broadcast, first aired, April 19, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 18:20

^{iv} Thomas G. Long, from an untitled sermon preached at Washington National Cathedral, June 1, 2008